



# IPS INSIGHTS

Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

## “Cockroach” Across India: The Emergence of a New Political Movement?

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Politics in the Indian subcontinent has its own distinct character. At times, people even embrace derogatory labels given to them by their opponents and transform them into symbols of identity and resistance. During the protests against Bangladesh’s quota system, then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina referred to the protesting students as “Razakars” – a term used by Hasina and her allies alluding to the pro-Pakistan volunteer forces of the 1971 war in Bangladesh. Rather than rejecting the accusation, the students adopted the slogan, “*Ami ke? Tumi ke? Razakar, Razakar*” (*Who am I? Who are you? Razakar, Razakar*). The slogan soon became the defining symbol of the protest movement, and within days, Sheikh Hasina was forced to leave the country.

A similar scene now appears to be unfolding in India, where students protesting against alleged corruption in the examination system, paper leaks, unemployment, and the government’s handling of these issues were reportedly compared with “cockroaches” by the country’s Chief Justice, Surya Kant. Surprisingly, instead of rejecting the label, the young protesters embraced it as part of their identity, arguing that if they are considered “cockroaches,” then they are the kind that cannot be crushed. In this context, some circles sarcastically began referring to the movement as the Cockroach Janata Party (CJP) – an acronym deliberately resembling that of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Today, the protests have expanded well beyond demands for examination reforms. They have increasingly become a symbol of youth discontent, economic hardship, and calls for greater government accountability. The intensity of the movement can be gauged from the fact that during protests outside Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s residence in New Delhi, Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi was briefly detained. While the Indian National Congress and other opposition parties appear to stand alongside the public’s anger, they seem to be attempting to accompany the movement rather than take control of its leadership. The ruling education minister – whose resignation is one of the demands from students – has criticized the Congress’ solidarity as shameless exploitation of “students as political tools.”<sup>2</sup> Whereas, some political observers argue that this is precisely what distinguishes the protests from conventional party politics and gives them the character of a relatively autonomous popular movement.

Spatially, the nucleus of the protest is centered in the country’s capital, with thousands of people travelling miles to show solidarity with the youth. At the site of demonstration, protesters comprise of young men and women who travelled in groups from other cities, such as Bihar, Maharashtra, UP, and Haryana. Though majority of protesters are concentrated in Delhi, the youth across the country is also

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Sheils McNamee, “Why are thousands protesting for education reform in India?” BBC, July 22, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cedj9j91p8o>

Given all these realities, at present, however, it would be premature to conclude whether the so-called “Cockroach Movement” will bring about a decisive shift in Indian politics. However, if millions of young people remain united around issues such as examination transparency, employment opportunities, and government accountability, the movement is unlikely to remain confined to educational reforms alone. Instead, it could have significant implications for the political landscape leading up to the 2029 general elections. The political history of the Indian subcontinent suggests that, at times, a sarcastic label can evolve into the metaphor for a major political upheaval.



<sup>4</sup> Ishita Mishra, "ABVP claims Jantar Mantar protest was 'hijacked', presses govt. to form panel on exam reforms," *The Hindu*, July 22, 2026, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/abvp-claims-jantar-mantar-protest-was-hijacked-seeks-panel-on-exam-reforms/article71253256.ece?hl=en-US#:~:text=%E2%80%99CTo%20ensure%20the%20credibility%20and%20transparency%20of,regarding%20the%20NEET%20DUG%20issue%2C%E2%80%9D%20the%20statement%20read>